On Why Architecture Matters by Paul Goldberger

A Philosophical Critique by Jason M. Gross

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In Why Architecture Matters, Paul Goldberger, an architecture critic for *The New Yorker*, defines what constitutes the best building designs and how architecture impacts society. As the title implies, Goldberger bestows great power on architecture to stimulate its onlookers, intellectually and emotionally. The building is the spectacle, the passerby a mere spectator, and therefore the building is paramount. In analyzing the text, one uncovers the Goldberger formula for great architecture as well as how city dwellers, or flaneurs, and users experience it. Though there are some significant inconsistencies in the book, which will be addressed at the end of this paper, there is a formula that forms the overall basis for Goldberger's theory – and he applies it to individual buildings, streets, and cities. Goldberger takes a certain level of Normalcy in buildings and cities as a given. By supplementing this architectural Normalcy with Difference, meaning some sort of innovation, it yields an Awakening of the flaneurs. The formula is also "anchored" by two key attributes: beauty and simultaneity. Though Goldberger maintains discussions about the meaning of architecture cannot be limited to aesthetics, he quotes Art Historian Joseph Connors as saying "Beauty has the power to disarm the raging barbarian" (28) and emphasizes form over function throughout the book. The second anchor refers to the requirement that the flaneur feel opposing forces, such as pleasure and serenity, order and novelty, and equilibrium and revelation, which to an extent coincide with Normalcy and Difference, simultaneously.

Goldberger's Intellectual Formula

In beginning to define Normalcy, Goldberger frames it within the context of a city. He writes, "for a city to work, architects need to feel as if they are designing a section of a much larger composition" (219), "but an architectural composition rarely succeeds if the elements that make it up are so different that they appear to be in competition with one another" (104). He cites the Royal Crescent townhomes (Figure A) in Bath, England, designed by John Wood the Younger, and the Place des Vosges in Paris (Figure B), as featuring repeated patterns, which make for a stronger overall impression. Goldberger also includes tradition in his Normalcy concept by qualifying the aforementioned composition as one that "began long before [the architects] and will continue long after them" (219). Finally, he incorporates the notion of uniformity as part of this architectural norm. Paris "works so well" because it is essentially comprised of one building type, the eight story stone apartment block (217).

Goldberger describes four ways to achieve Difference: distorting tradition, novelty, revelation, or by reforming the cityscape. Christ Church in Spitalfields (Figure C), designed by Nicholas Hawksmoor, combines elements of Gothic, Classical, and Palladian traditions, resulting in an unusual structure, especially the "stacking of spire atop tower atop arched portico" (107). Robert Smithson's Wollaton Hall (Figure D), which starred as Batman's Wayne Manor in *Dark Knight Rises*, similarly distorts tradition, by combining Elizabethan with Jacobean styles, and with a very high central hall serving as the top floor, it is a distinctive work of architecture. One other example of novelty would be Louis Sullivan's Owatonna Bank (Figure E) that features two swooping arches. Borromini's Sant'Ivo, a Roman Catholic church in Rome, creates a sense of revelation, by making you feel as if you

are about to rise upward toward the heavens. Skyscrapers are the best examples of structures that reform the cityscape. Goldberger highlights the John Hancock Tower in Boston (Figure F), sculpted in a parallelogram shape, and the CCTV Tower in Beijing (Figure G) as significantly altering the look and feel of these cities.

What is the upshot of this architectural balancing act between Normalcy and Difference? According to Goldberger, it is the Awakening of the flaneur. Awakening means an emotional, intellectual, and visual stimulation. Buildings demand recognition because of their visible difference and in turn "[jolt] us into a higher level of perception than [we] normally have" (112). "They can make us feel and think" (x) and "fill us with dreams of another and better world" (39). In Norman Jaffe's Gates of the Grove (Jewish Center of the Hamptons) (Figure H) in East Hampton, New York, worshipers are inspired spiritually through the structure's mysterious play on light. At Yale University, Eero Saarinen's Ingalls Rink (Figure I) creates an athletic awakening for hockey players, who have reported feeling propelled by the structure's arch down the center.

Subjectivities

There are four subjectivities at work in Why Architecture Matters. The most privileged one is the Building itself. Goldberger personifies it and establishes it as a powerful symbol for civilization. A sense of Community, he argues, is the backbone of cities, and buildings are the "greatest physical symbol" of it (x). They make political statements; can "make us feel and [think]" (x), unleash a sense of the past (xi), and serve as the "ultimate physical representation of a culture" (16), yet at the same time should also "respect their neighbors" (220).

The second subjectivity is the Architect. Goldberger sees him as an artistic genius that is able to convey an idea and evoke emotion through the structure he creates. He says Italian architect Francesco Borromini had the "ability to take common forms and shapes and combine them in such a way as to produce drama and surprise" (122). In designing Sant 'Ivo, he created a space that "has at once the clarity of the Renaissance and the mystery of the Gothic" (125). This is to imply that the Architect has a great ability to make a building culturally significant.

The city is the third subjectivity used in Goldberger's argument. The city's role is to be "common ground and to make a kind of common body of memory, and as such to strengthen us and stimulate us" (233). The city as an entity wants to attract tourism and investment in order to fulfill this role. The link with architecture is that impressive skyscrapers form an important part of the cityscape and look most impressive from a distance, drawing tourists and businesses from far away.

The least privileged subjectivity is the Flaneur or the City Dweller. In some cases, this extends to the inhabitants and users of buildings. Goldberger implies that he cannot see and recognize on his own and has no sense of awareness. The Flaneur needs external objects for inspiration and to think about new ideas.

Conditions of Possibility

There are three key conditions of possibility, or things that are implicit, for Goldberger's intellectual formula to be valid. The first is that city dwellers are asleep and need something concrete to stimulate them. The second is revealed when Goldberger quotes Rudolf Arnheim, as having written contrast is "at the very core of the human sense of what life is and ought to be" (103). The third is that neither total architectural

uniformity nor radical architectural concepts are valuable, as Goldberger emphasizes the need for balance in building design.

Who or what is served by the Goldberger philosophy of architecture? First is the notion that aesthetics is valued over function. "Every iconic piece of architecture speaks to us simultaneously as both form and symbol" (17). It is through the form, or design, that the symbolism emerges. Apparently, the usefulness and functionality are not pivotal to Goldberger for a structure to be truly great. Architects who emphasize aesthetic concerns therefore benefit from Goldberger's worldview. Second is the idea that reality is objective and that architecture presents that reality. Architecture "represents the real, and that is ever more precious in an age of the virtual" (234). Finally, architecture that strikes a balance between tradition and modernism is served by Goldberger's theory.

Redefining Assumptions

There are three ways in which one could redefine key implicit assumptions in Goldberger's argument. First, what if we redefine what yields Awakening? Second, what if we redefine the purpose of architecture? Third, what if we redefine the purpose of cities?

If we redefine what yields or what is Awakening, four scenarios could emerge. First, a closer adherence to tradition and more uniformity could yield a more recognizable city, and potentially more variation across cities. In other words, cities would define themselves according to a certain style, to a greater extent than under Goldberger's framework as he advocates for variation, difference, and contrast in architecture, within a city, on a street, and even within a single building itself. He cites Paris as representing a singular architectural style effectively, but this would become a more common occurrence if his formula for Awakening changes. Second, more radical architecture, which is not beautiful

but very useful and functional, would become more commonplace. Third, if architecture is no longer what yields an Awakening or not to the same extent, city dwellers will focus on finding inspiration through other channels, some of which may be more abstract in nature. Fourth, one could redefine what type of Awakening he has in mind. For example, there is such a thing as a sensual Awakening. Goldberger alludes to this in referencing the curves of the TWA Terminal at JFK Airport (Figure J), but does not mention it again. If sensuality were made to be a central component of Awakening, more structures would be designed to evoke that sort of emotion. It is conceivable that society would become more romantically and sexually active as a result.

What if we redefine the purpose of architecture? It is not a given that architecture must inspire or awaken its onlookers. The purpose could be to intimidate the flaneurs. Alternatively, architecture could serve to hypnotize or lull to sleep the city dwellers. If more structures were designed with these objectives in mind, there could be less emotionality and intellectual activity. There could even be fewer revolts because the masses would not be as excited by the buildings around them.

Finally, what if we redefine the purpose of cities? Goldberger stresses a sense of community in terms of what buildings can achieve. In turn, he argues that is at the core of what cities are all about. If we redefined the purpose of cities to cultivate individuality to a greater extent, there would be more variation in architectural design on a given street for example, and buildings could also be smaller in scale than they otherwise would be. There would be fewer spaces in which large numbers of people would congregate, and a greater number of smaller spaces to house smaller numbers of people or even individuals and couples by themselves.

Problems with Goldberger's Argument

Goldberger picks and chooses somewhat arbitrarily what constitutes positive additions to the cityscape. For example, he cites Trystan Edwards, an architectural theorist who says buildings should show deference to one another. Yet, he also references Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (Figure K) as an example of contextual architecture, even though its unusual sculpted titanium design is radically different from the adjacent buildings. It does not defer to its neighbors. It actually overpowers them.

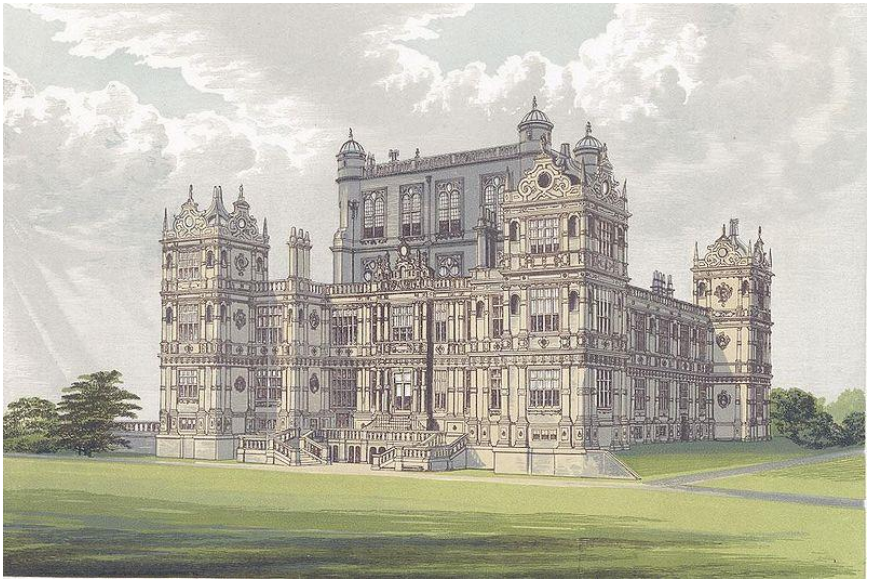
In building his case that architecture makes city dwellers feel and think, Goldberger cites Norman Jaffe's Gates of the Grove in East Hampton, New York as illustrating a "movement toward openness and light, an ascension in every sense of the word" (134). He also describes Albert Speer, the lead architect for the Nazis, as producing designs that were "dull" and "bombastic" (104). However, Speer's Cathedral of Light (Figure L) is an example of a structure that is uplifting and powerful, just as Gates of the Grove is. I believe Goldberger chooses to devalue Speer's work because the type of "awakening" sought after by the Nazis is not what he wants to promote. This in turn produces a non-objective evaluation of Speer's architecture. In a parallel point, Goldberger also promotes buildings that retain a certain style yet at the same time are different in some way. I would cite the Palazzo della Civilta Italiana (Figure M) as an innovatively designed iconic work of fascist architecture, commissioned by Benito Mussolini, which was inspired by Roman Rationalism and neoclassicism, but distorts those styles in a unique and memorable way. For example, it is made up of six parallelograms atop a square base, and features a series of superimposed loggias, shown on the façade as six rows of nine arches each. Goldberger cites various politically iconic structures from the Washington Monument to the U.S.

Capitol, yet never praises any fascist architecture, most likely because it is the corresponding political ideology, which he finds problematic, rather than the structures themselves. There are examples of fascist architecture that reflect Goldberger's formula for good design, but the ideology promoted by its builders does not conform to his implied notion of Awakening, undermining his entire theory of "why architecture matters."

(A) Royal Crescent Townhomes, Architect: John Wood the Younger, Bath, England

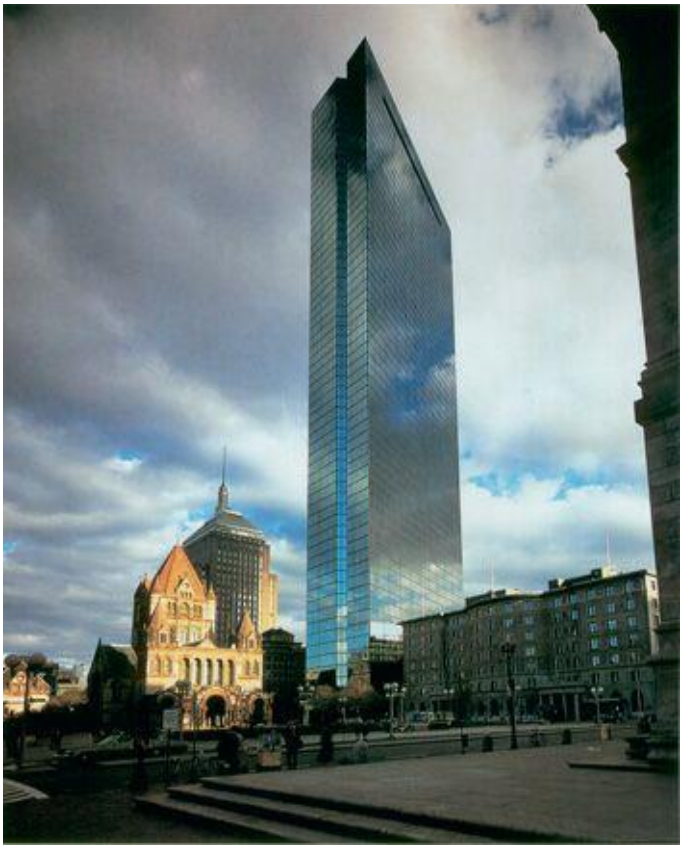
(B) Place de Vosge, Architect: Baptiste du Cerceau, Paris, France

(C) Christ Church, Spitalfields, Architect; Nicholas Hawksmoor, London Borough of Tower Hamlets, England

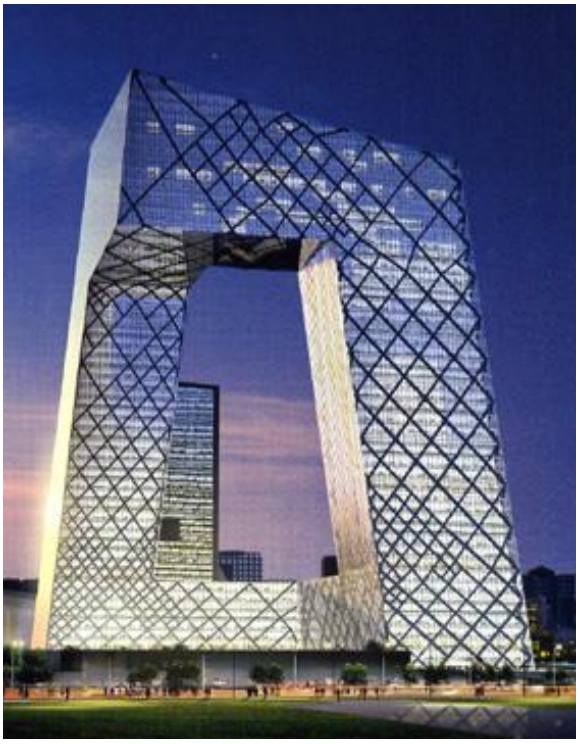


(D) Wollaton Hall, Architect: Robert Smithson, Nottingham, England

(E) Owantonna Bank, Architect: Louis Sullivan, Owatonna, Minnesota

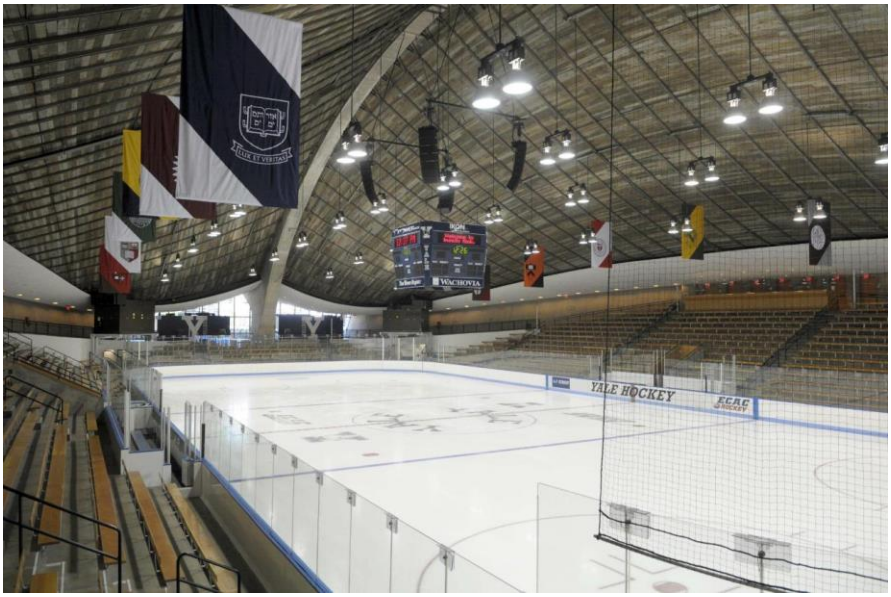


(F) John Hancock Tower, Architect: Henry N. Cobb, Boston, Massachusetts

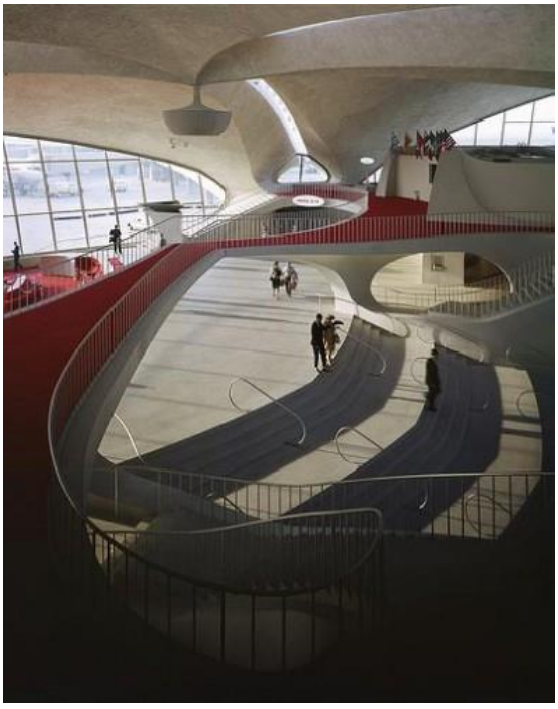


(G) CCTV Tower, Architect: OMA, Beijing, China

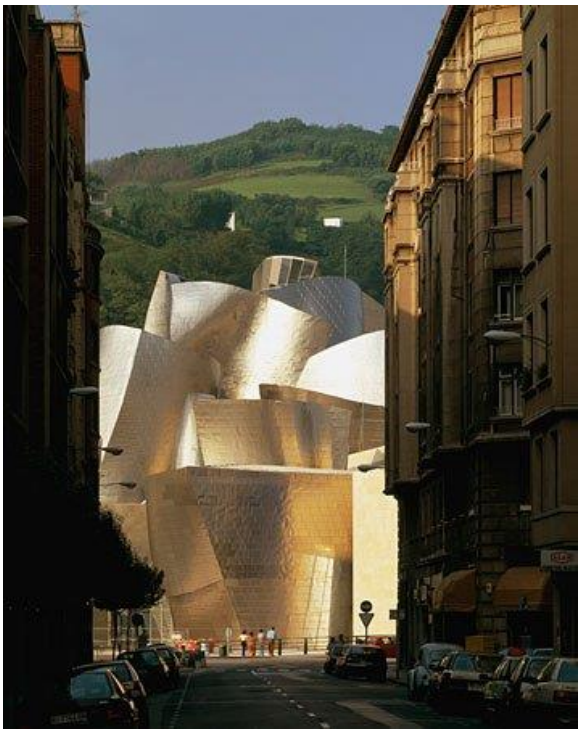
(H) Gates of the Grove, Architect: Norman Jaffe, East Hampton, New York



(I) Ingalls Rink, Yale University, Architect: Eero Saarinen, New Haven, Connecticut



(J) TWA Terminal, JFK Airport, Architect: Eero Saarinen, Queens, New York



(K) Guggenheim Bilbao, Architect: Frank Gehry, Abando, Bilbao, Spain

(L) Cathedral of Light, Architect: Albert Speer, Nuremberg, Germany

(M) Palazzo de Civilta Italiana, Architect: Various commissioned by Mussolini, Rome, Italy